



STUDY OF TWO WOMEN KNEELING

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GANG VIOLENCE AND HIV TRANSMISSION

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SAN ANTONIO, Texas — A street gang that requires young women to have unprotected sex with AIDS virus-positive males as part of its initiation has recruited at least five girls, ages 14 and 15, officials said Monday. Joann King-Sinnett, spokeswoman for the city's Planned Parenthood, said her agency recently came across the five girls when they came in to undergo AIDS testing. King-Sinnett said she 'got chills' when she listened to the girls tell their story. 'These girls were terrified and wanted to be tested for HIV through our counseling sessions. They said fellow gang members told them they should have unprotected sex with those who are HIV-positive to become members.' The spokeswoman said the girls tested negative for the virus, but she warned that medical research shows that sometimes it can take months after such a sexual encounter for the virus to show up. 'It is very possible there may be several more girls who have had similar experience but haven't come forward like these five. It is also possible that the gang members were lying about it just to entice these girls. It is really horrifying, shocking that these girls would subject themselves to such a deadly risk. 'For reasons of confidentiality and the need to protect the privacy of these girls, we cannot reveal the gang's name. There may be other such gangs doing similar things.' Police Sgt. David Ramos said promiscuous sexual activities do sometimes occur as part of gang initiations. He cited a case in Dec, 1992, in which a young girl told of being sexually assaulted by 10 gang members. Ramos said the first police heard of that incident, however, was when it was reported by Planned Parenthood. 'If both the girls and the boys were underage and the girls voluntarily sought out AIDS-infected partners and knew they had AIDS, I'm not sure any law would have been broken,' Ramos said. King-Sinnett said it is difficult to pass judgment on the girls since they come from poor families, have 'extremely low-self-esteem,'

and 'are afraid because they are caught in a very terrible situation where they face risk either way -- by belonging to gang or being attacked for refusing to belong.' King-Sinnett said some of the girls refuse to use condoms because they insist on having babies through the gang members. 'We just can't get through to them that they are not invincible, that they are taking a horrible risk by seeking gang membership,' she said.

The case outlined above demonstrates the immense risk of HIV transmission faced by girl gang members. These girls are young, usually uneducated, and come from extremely poor backgrounds — adding to their vulnerability. As shown in the case, these girls are victims of extreme sexism and sexual abuse, yet oftentimes willingly subject themselves to this treatment due to their highly volatile home lives. Their status as gang members makes them part of both an incredibly unstable and invisible population. As part of a hidden population, there is no published data or academic literature on the prevalence of gang members living with HIV/AIDS and their increased risk of infection. As such, gang members remain ignored by the public health community and targeted with heavy moral judgmentalism by the general population. In this essay I hope to explicate the social factors underlying female gang members' heightened predisposition to HIV/AIDS within a framework of instability and structural violence, analyze the public health issues at stake, and discuss the obligation to aid this population using a fabric of Catholic social teaching.

According to the FBI, around 33,000 gangs exist in U.S. territories with more than 1.4 million active members.¹ Of these, many operate as “street” or “neighborhood” gangs,

¹ “2015 National Gang Report (NGR).” (FBI, 1 July 2016).